



Getting Started: Health Manager Networks

Introduction to Health Manager Networks

Some Head Start health managers work in isolation without the benefit of a workplace community. Most health managers see their peers at an annual conference or meeting. But meeting once a year is not enough to develop relationships and find peer support. An organized health manager network can provide opportunities to connect and provide support frequently and regularly. This document provides a starting point for helping you learn more about health manager networks and how to build one.

A health manager network includes, but is not limited to, a group of three or more managers and staff who work in health, nutrition, mental health, and oral health services. The members of this group share a common interest in the work they do and a desire to do it better. They also make a commitment to interacting regularly.

Benefits of a Health Manager Network

A health manager network can build knowledge and provide peer support among members. A network can also affirm the expertise of its members and recognize talents through the relationships it promotes. A network can even reduce staff turnover and strengthen a program's capacity. And because the members control it, a network can provide a powerful sense of ownership and self-determination.



Health manager networks support improved services by building relationships among those in similar positions across Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Ideally, these groups become communities of practice, which members design and maintain to meet their specific needs.

The networks can serve a variety of purposes, among them:

- Policy development
- Professional development
- Information and knowledge sharing
- Peer mentoring
- Promotion of local health activities
- Support on specific health topics

Health managers report many benefits from networking, such as sharing sample forms and policy manuals, delivering joint trainings, orienting new managers, and identifying local partners that provide free or low-cost sensory screenings.

Getting Started

Once you have decided to build a health manager network, you'll want to invite others to join the effort and share the benefits of networking. Your enthusiasm and advocacy can generate interest, commitment, and buy-in that will be a crucial first step in building and sustaining your network. Below and on the following pages is a list of steps to help you get started. Review the entire list. The order is flexible and you may choose to vary the steps depending upon your own preferences and process.

► Identify Peer Leadership

Your first contact with potential leaders is your opportunity to begin to explore ways to establish a viable network. During your first meeting or call, you'll want to "sell" the idea to a group of peers and gauge their level of interest. This outreach can also help identify some early priorities for the new group. Avoid making only one person responsible or creating a network built on one person's shoulders. Ideally, at least two managers will share leadership responsibilities to help ease the workload on any one person.

► Engage External Champions

As critical as peer leadership is, a new network will have trouble getting off the ground without some assistance from leaders outside of the group. These are your external champions. These external champions might be members of other Head Start professional networks, including other health managers. These people are in positions to help you establish and possibly maintain your network. You'll want to engage program directors in particular in this capacity. Involve them early in the process of developing your network. Directors can be important allies because of their ability to encourage health managers to participate in and help build the network. Be



sure to keep them informed and share with them the ways a network can support and retain staff. Discuss with program directors whether attendance at network meetings can be used as staff professional development. For example, these professional development opportunities could include learning from experts in fields such as ophthalmology, audiology, nutrition or primary care.

Other health leaders and key stakeholders you may want to contact include staff from:

- [Head Start Collaboration Offices](#)
- State or Regional Head Start Associations or Consortia
- State or Regional T/TA

- Head Start Regional Offices
- The [state agency that administers child care licensing](#) and/or funding in your state
- Your state Title V agency
- Primary care professional associations

Head Start health managers may already be working with other health-related groups within the state. Consider contacting them to build on what may already be in place:

- [Child and Adult Care Food Program \(CACFP\) state agency](#) work group members
- Child care health consultants
- Early childhood mental health consultants
- School nurses
- Oral health advocates

► Define Purpose and Clarify Membership

Start thinking about what the mission or purpose will be for your network. You may want to talk to other health manager networks to see how they have defined their purpose. You will also want to talk about this in your first meeting and ask the people you contact what they would like to get out of the network.

Health managers in your state may have broad responsibilities. They may have oversight of physical, mental, and oral health, as well as disabilities and other service areas. You might choose to begin by including all Head Start health staff. Or you might choose to define your network more narrowly. These decisions are yours to make. There is no right or wrong approach. For instance, some networks have parallel groups of health managers and nutrition managers.

They meet together for part of the time and separately for the remainder of the time. Other groups meet together all the time and still others may choose to be distinctly different.

Whether you choose to define your group narrowly or broadly, you'll want to involve all members in defining the purpose and direction of the network. You can do this both at the beginning and again later on as needs and challenges change over time.

In order to reach out to potential members, you or another leader will need to develop a contact list. The list includes names, job titles, program names, addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses. Refer back to your champions, key stakeholders within your state, and program directors to gather contact information for health staff. Some states have an early childhood registry that includes health partners whom you may wish to add to your contacts.

To begin building a contact list, you may want to:

- [Go to the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center \(ECLKC\) website and find Head Start/Early Head Start programs in your area.](#)
- Contact programs and find out who is in charge of health services.
- Get emails and phone numbers for health managers in your area.
- Check with external champions or stakeholders that may have access to contact information.

Be prepared to send a simple email or make a brief phone call that shares your interest in creating a health managers network (see Outreach section below). Think about how

you will answer the question, “Why do I want to build a health manager network?” The answer can be simple—“I think it would be great to be able to speak with others who are doing the same thing I do. I have heard that networks can be a valuable source of support.”

► Outreach

After you have developed a preliminary membership list, you can begin outreach to the potential members on that list. You might

begin by sending an introductory email, explaining your vision for the group, inviting them to join, and asking them to reply if they are interested in participating. This initial contact is a good opportunity to create excitement and get ideas for how the network might support its members. These ideas will help you discover the concerns and interests of other health managers. You can also begin to identify the resources and expertise among the members that will strengthen your network and make it an exciting group to join.



The First Network Meeting

Whether your first meeting is in person or virtual, through conference call or videoconference, it will be the launch of a new initiative. It will also be your first opportunity to engage the larger group in working together for a shared purpose. This sets the groundwork for long-term sustainability. Consider using the [PACT](#) (Purpose, Agenda, Chairperson, Team ground rules) process for running an effective meeting.

Every meeting has to have an effective purpose that is clear to all its participants. Meeting because you feel you have to is one purpose, but not one that inspires meaningful engagement.

You will want to design an initial meeting agenda that attracts members and satisfies their desire for new information and peer support. Your meeting will also need to serve an organizational purpose, by addressing such questions as:

- How frequently do you want to meet?
- What types of issues do you want to discuss in the future?
- What is the best way to contact people?

School readiness begins with health!

- Is everyone's contact information accurate?
- Are there others who should be invited to the next meeting?

You might also want to spend some time just getting to know each other and learning what each others' programs are like.

Remember, a good **agenda** serves as a road map for the meeting and allows participants to arrive prepared and able to contribute.

The meeting's **chairperson** is responsible for keeping the team on task and making sure that all participants have a chance to contribute. The group should generate **team ground rules**. Ground rules are necessary for maintaining a climate that allows for effective work.

Most agenda items should result in a **plan of action** describing what will be done as a result of the discussion and decisions that take place at the meeting. After a plan of action is in place, someone needs to track **accountability**. This means making sure that for each action step there is a designated person who agrees to act and a timeframe defining when that activity will occur. A new health manager network can be invisible without a conscious effort to **communicate**. The group should determine what are the best communication mechanisms to use. Finally, a good facilitator plans a **timely assessment** about the process of the meeting to evaluate participants' satisfaction.

Next Steps

Your network is in place and you have begun meeting. Congratulations! You can now turn your attention to sustaining your network and ensuring that it is providing the peer support to help health managers improve health service delivery in their programs.

While you'll want to start your network with a "live" meeting, whether in-person or by phone, your group may want to utilize other



methods to continue communicating with each other. The virtual tools that are available—such as video chat, social networking, email, and teleconferencing options—make it possible to overcome challenges of time and space. The availability of these ways to communicate increases a network's ability to connect frequently. They also make it easier for members to share resources. You can share a document, "meet" at your convenience, or work together on a project at the same time. Consult the National Center on Health (NCH) [*Directory of Virtual Meeting Tools*](#) for ways to keep your members connected and involved.

The NCH believes that network members are more likely to value and sustain peer support networks that are driven by local leadership. NCH provides some materials and limited technical assistance to support existing health manager networks and encourage new ones. NCH materials are available on the [ECLKC](#) website. You can reach NCH via email (nchinfo@aap.org) or the toll-free info line (1-888-227-5125).